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Professor Researches Connection Between Sustainability and Student Transformation at UCO

Sustainability was at the forefront of University of Central Oklahoma student Ben Zimmer's project, "Energy Efficiency Evaluation and Solution Plan," which evaluated how the university can reduce its energy consumption by 20 percent by 2020. Zimmer's research has been reviewed by Dr. Janette Brunstein as she studies the teaching of sustainability in transformative learning.

Brunstein, a business administration professor from Mackenzie Presbyterian University in Sao Paulo, Brazil, has spent the fall semester at UCO researching how sustainability relates to the university's focus on transformative learning and its Central Six tenets, core areas identified by the university as necessary skills for graduates to be productive, ethical and engaged citizens. Brunstein's research focuses on the tenets of Global and Cultural Competencies, Leadership, and Service Learning and Civic Engagement.

For Brunstein, the research is not only about students' transformation, but about societal change.

"We're trying to develop the idea that critical reflection transformative learning is not about just individual transformation, but also about social transformation,"

Brunstein said. “I think it can be a very important contribution to UCO, too, and foster sustainability.”

UCO is an international leader in transformative learning, initiating the first-ever project to measure and track student engagement and transformation, the Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR). A student’s involvement in a STLR-tagged activity such as a class assignment, group, on-campus job or event, is assessed by a trained faculty or staff member at the levels of exposure, integration or transformation in one or more of the Central Six tenets.

Brunstein is meeting with faculty and staff to see how they are teaching sustainability through STLR-tagged activities and how students are reflecting on what they have learned. She also developed faculty focus groups to discuss their incorporation of sustainability into their teaching. The focus groups looked at how professors are expanding their reach beyond the classroom to achieve societal transformation.

“I have seen professors doing a very, very interesting job in this direction,” she said.

One class assignment allowed students to look at food security inequities in “poverty tax” pricing at two grocery store locations. Students surveyed shoppers and developed a petition to ask the stores to apply equal pricing at all locations.

Eric Hemphill, UCO's manager of sustainability, recognized Brunstein's previous experience in researching sustainability in education and how it will benefit the university.

"I'm so glad that Janette is bringing her years of experience and research expertise to UCO. I cannot wait to see the results of this research, and to use it to continue development in sustainable thought and research at UCO," Hemphill said.

Brunstein is completing the research alongside Dr. Jeff King, executive director of UCO's Center for Excellence in Transformative Teaching and Learning. Brunstein and King plan to publish their findings and Brunstein will use the research in her post-doctoral report.

Brunstein will return to Brazil in January. This semester was her first experience conducting research in the United States, but she hopes it is not the last.

"I hope this is the first of many," she said.

She hopes to continue her relationship with UCO through a continued partnership. King invited Brunstein to be part of the Transformative Learning International Collaborative (TLIC), a group created by King to discuss transformative learning being implemented as part of an institutional framework.

Other institutions have contacted or come to UCO to learn how to practice transformative learning and develop programs similar to STLR at their universities. Universities in New Zealand, Germany, and South Africa are among the TLIC.

To learn more about transformative learning and STLR, visit <http://uco.edu/tl>.

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